

Singita



WILDLIFE REPORT
SINGITA PAMUSHANA, ZIMBABWE
For the month of February, Two Thousand and Twenty-Four

Temperature

Average minimum: 21.6°C (70.8°F)
Minimum recorded: 18.4°C (47.1°F)
Average maximum: 35.1°C (95.1°F)
Maximum recorded: 40.7°C (105.2°F)

Rainfall Recorded

For the month: 38 mm
Season to date: 303.6 mm
*Season = Sep to Aug

Sunrise & Sunset

Sunrise: 05:50
Sunset: 18:21

We've had high temperatures this February, and this results in much of the wildlife spending their time in the proximity of water points. At one stage we located seven species at the central Banyini waterhole: zebra, buffalo, black rhino, giraffe, kudu, impala and wildebeest. Other hotspots have been O2 Pan, Ngwenyeni Pan and Nduna platform. At Nduna a total of seven white rhinos and one black rhino were seen, with four lions a short distance away. It's also been a joy to host keen birders this month, and concentrate on our abundance of feathered friends.

Here's a sightings snapshot for February:

Lions

Excellent lion sightings as always. Highlights included:

- Lions struggling to catch a buffalo. Eventually they managed to kill a calf, but they nearly failed and it was a hard-won result.
- In a more peaceful scene lions were relaxing in the shade, and an elephant bull strolled past them without either species being too concerned.
- Nduna Pride: At Nduna Dam a large herd of buffalo surrounded some inexperienced hunters from the pride. The young lions tried to hunt a buffalo but were chased away by the rest of the herd. Part of the pride spent significant time on the shore of the Malilangwe Dam, close to the harbour. Those going on a sundowner boat cruise could see the six lions relaxing on the shoreline.
- River Pride: Members of this pride were seen between O2 Pan on the eastern side of the Chiredzi, and Ngwenyeni Pan on the western side, and it included a mating pair.

Leopards

- So very fleeting, as always. However, two good sightings were of a female at Nyamasikana Crossing heading towards Kwali, and another, shortly after the drive started, when there was a leopard standing at the edge of the road for a few minutes.

Wild dogs

- There've been encouraging sightings of two packs of wild dogs.
- A pack of six were seen along the river, and got chased by elephants.
- A pack of 11 were sleeping in the open. In the same area, 20 metres away, were baboons and a hyena. The dogs chased the baboons and then found the hyena which they chased up a hill.

Hyenas

- A large clan of hyenas was seen having a raucous banquet feeding on a buffalo carcass.
- Another interesting sighting was of a clan of nine taking on a sub-adult male lion. The guide and tracker tried to investigate the cause of the fight but there was no evidence of a kill, and could have just been the hyenas taking advantage of the lone lion. The lion managed to escape without severe injuries.

Rhinos

- It would appear that the black rhino population is vying with the white population for attention. We have had sightings of both on almost every drive! On one occasion there were six black and four white rhinos, and an elephant bull, sharing the same mud wallow.

Elephants

- The bulls have been showing off tremendously this month – we've seen them drinking, mudbathing, sparring and being obnoxious.
- Two that were in musth were seen breaking trees, as if showcasing their strength and preparing a battle arena. When the physical fight started and the younger bull ran away.
- A huge elephant bull insisted on ambling down the road in front of the game viewer and occasionally turning to face the vehicle, thereby showing the awestruck guests his huge tusks.
- The breeding herds have been seen in the swamps and along the riverbanks and dam.

Buffalo

- A frenetic sighting was of about 400 buffaloes, two black rhinos and six white rhinos all at Nduna Dam.
- One morning game drive encountered three different herds of buffaloes. The biggest group was at Chikwete, consisting of approximately 300 animals, and it was amazing to watch them make their way down a cliff churning up a big cloud of dust.

Plains game

- The highlight of the month with regards to plains game was finding a herd of majestic sable antelope, together with a herd of eland, sharing the waterhole at Banyini, with a herd of over 200 buffaloes heading towards the water.

Boat cruise

- The boat cruises are always relaxing with unbeatably beautiful scenery, and sightings of hippos, crocs and birds guaranteed. Shoreline bonuses this month were lions, buffalo, waterbuck, impala, white rhino and a breeding herd of elephants that swam and waded across a narrow channel.

Fishing

- It's a memorable experience for those who have never fished before to catch a fish and, if it cannot be released, have the chefs prepare it for dinner.

Photographic hide

- There have been a couple of forays into the sunken hide, and they've been productive during the later hours of the afternoon and evening. The pan has attracted numerous white rhinos, a black rhino bull, elephant bulls, a buffalo bull and a herd of 30 eland.

Rock art

- The San rock art that prevails here is so artistic, refined and delicate compared to that of Bantu-speakers rock art which is sometimes found superimposed over San or Khoi paintings.

Kambako Living Museum of Bushcraft

- Visits to this interactive museum just beyond our boundary are always fascinating and thoroughly enjoyed.

Walks

- A couple of bush walks have been conducted this month, the guides taking care to choose open clear habitat because the grass is high and the bush thick at this time, which reduces visibility.

Some bush stories follow, as well as the February Gallery.

Nyala warfare

We'd just arrived at Sosigi Dam to find a breeding herd of elephants calmly drinking there. Delighted I switched off the engine, only to hear a loud earth-shattering commotion, just around the bend. We quickly investigated and found two nyala bulls engaged in a rare and intense battle for dominance.

Nyala bulls are typically peaceful creatures that seldom resort to aggression, but when they do they go full tilt and it can result in fatalities. Usually, however, they circle each other, with their heads low, eyeing out the other in their peripheral vision. They do what we term a lateral display, by erecting the dorsal manes on their back, fluffing their tails, arching their necks and stepping in an exaggerated Lipizzaner-like manner with their bright yellow legs.



This was a scene of smashing horns, intense scrumming, twisting bodies, straining muscles, swirling dust and cracking vegetation. Rage, defiance and fury fuelled their rapid advances and retreats as they duelled it out.

Fortunately, with a final, decisive clash, one bull emerged victorious. He kept his crest raised as the defeated bull reluctantly lowered his head and crest and slunk off, somewhat sheepishly. The winner is awarded dominance of the area and mating rights. What he'll do to keep them is continue lateral displays, stab his horns into soil, thrash bushes, and pack mud or foliage around his horns - all peaceful intimidation techniques to look big, powerful and well-weaponed.

It really was intimidating to witness their power, struggle and triumph and we all took a while to recover from the violence as we gazed at the chilled-out elephants enjoying the cool water of the dam.

Nyala are the most sexually dimorphic antelope we see here. The females look very different and are hornless and chestnut in colour with pretty white stripes. The females have no reason for dominance, and

the males go to extremes to avoid combat, hence their size, horns, manes and coat colours which they use to display and intimidate.



Both males lock horns – it has happened before that they interlock and get stuck, and both end up dying or being killed by a predator as they're unable to escape.

Here the victor struts his success as the loser walks away in sullen defeat.



Dancing with black rhinos

The last thing I was expecting to find in the late morning heat, out in an open field of grassland with one tree, was a black rhino. But there it was, larger than life, with a couple of ox-peckers and a white cattle egret in attendance. The oxpeckers were combing through his skin, as they do, looking for ticks and mites, and the cattle egret was cashing in on the insects that were disturbed as the rhino disturbed the grass.

I don't think I've ever seen a cattle egret in attendance of a black rhino – you usually see them following buffalo or other plains game, because it is unusual to see black rhinos in vast grasslands as they prefer thick bush habitat. What was amazing is that the black rhino calmed down after the initial surprise we all got, rather than galloping off, and as he browsed about the egret darted in and out and around his legs as if dancing for its dinner.



Another unusual thing about this sighting was that the rhino had no left ear at all. I thought it might be a deformity but upon discussing it with our resident biologist, Sarah Clegg, who is currently working towards a PhD in the ecology of the black rhino at Malilangwe, she told me that there are a few black rhinos on the reserve that are missing an ear and it is the result of being attacked by hyenas when they are calves! A mother will keep her newborn calf hidden in dense cover for about two weeks.

Bull elephants

We left the vehicle at the top of the riverbank and made our way on foot a few metres down the bank to watch these bulls come and drink at the spot we anticipated they would, and they did. What we didn't anticipate was that the smaller of the four would slide down the opposite embankment on his rear end!



It was an awesome scene and they all drank, but then the bull with the big left tusk caught wind of us and was unsettled, so we hot-footed it back to the vehicle. A bull of that age has reason to be apprehensive of humans – it's true that elephants never forget.

I'd refer to the youngest bull that slid down the slope as an "askari", a word that translates to "soldier". It refers to youthful bull elephants who accompany larger, elder bulls. Askaris are vigilant and offer company and protection to a senior bull, and receive mentorship, benefiting from the wisdom and experience of the senior. It was clear that the bull with the large left tusk was the senior of this bachelor herd.

The sun was setting and the light low, so by underexposing dramatically I was able to use the backlight off the river to put the senior bull in silhouette, as seen in the cover page image of this journal.



Nothing to see here



It's so interesting to observe wild dogs setting out on a hunt. This pack had finished their afternoon ritual of waking up, playing with each other, having a drink and rallying a hunting party. There were some giraffe on the other side of the pan, but they only got a cursory look. The marabou stork and the critically endangered hooded vulture were of no interest to the endangered wild dogs. The pack assessed a herd of zebras but with no injured foals they too were of no interest and the pack actually lay down in the path in front of the unsettled zebras.

Then they revved a small herd of wildebeest, but the wildebeest were having none of their nonsense and grouped together charging at them, bucking and tossing their deadly horns about, and the dogs thought better of it. What they really wanted was to discover a newborn or injured calf and then they would have pursued it.

What I like most is the way they go about this initial assessment phase – they walk off in a single-file line, in a very casual, disinterested, low-slung, devil-may-care way – but don't be fooled for one millisecond because if a potential prey animal reveals itself its life will be over in seconds.



Thorny crown

Lions spend much of the day sleeping, but there comes a time when the temperature is just right and the sun golden yet soft, for them to wake up and start preparing for the evening's activities, whether that be hunting or territory patrol or checking in on their pride/s. This scarred dominant male had chosen to sleep beneath a thorn bush that offered good shade, surrounded by a soft bed of grass.

He looked so relaxed and confident, but at no time is a male lion's life safe. Cubs are often killed by older male lions that did not father them, during a pride takeover; young dispersing males risk their lives against established territorial males and other challenges; pride males are constantly under pressure from rivals; and old males risk being evicted from a pride.



Twitter

We're not sure what these two eagles had been feeding on, but it was clear the tawny was intent on not sharing – despite its bulging crop. It flew into the same tree as the bateleur, stared it down and then flew at it – chasing it off in a crash of wings and feathers and sticks.



Normally you'd expect to find different vultures squabbling over carrion, but bateleurs and tawny eagles feed on carrion too.

On the following page are two contrasts: a hot black and white Arnot's chat against a clear blue sky; and a cold colourful European bee-eater against a diffused green background. The chat had his beak open in a further effort to cool down by 'panting'; and the bee-eater had its feathers all fluffed up to trap layers of warm air to insulate itself.



February Gallery



It's always so endearing to see how a breeding herd of elephants use their trunks, legs and tails to protect the little infant elephants and guide them away from danger.



It's one thing being given the 'bombastic side eye' by a common flat lizard as you leave the bar, and another thing entirely when it's a young male lion that's spotted circling vultures.



Termitomyces, the termite mushrooms, are a genus of fungi, all of which are completely dependent on fungus-growing termites.



A buffalo bull enjoys a glorious mudbath, complete with an oxpecker enshrined upon his mud-caked horns.





Valentine's Day does not go uncelebrated in the wilds... Here a white rhino follows his heart; and a (harmless) red velvet mite performs a seductive dance to woo a female, alongside the "love nest" he has created.





The large size of an eland bull is illustrated in comparison to a young impala ram, in this photo. An adult eland bull is around 1.6 m (5.2 ft) tall at the shoulder and can weigh up to 942 kg (2 077 lb) with a typical range of 500-600 kg (1 100-1 300 lb). An impala reaches 70-92 cm (28-36 in) at the shoulder and weighs 40-76 kg (88-168 lb).

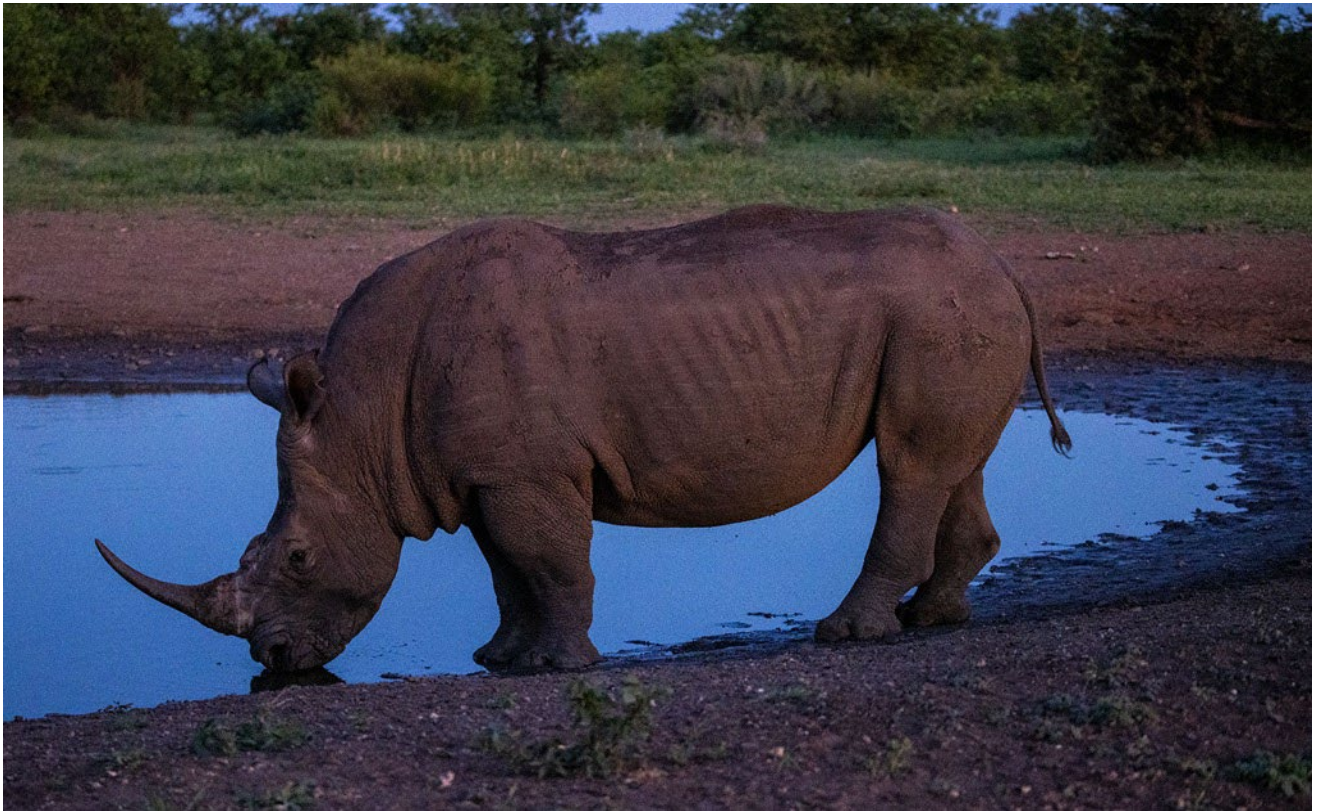


Kudu bulls have a shoulder height of about 1.4m, so only slightly shorter than an eland, but are far more lithe in body and weigh 190-270 kg (420-600 lb).



Look at the great condition of both of these middle-aged elephant bulls. They bulk up on endless trunkfuls of nutritious foliage during the green season, before having to resort to a more varied diet that includes roots and bark in the dry season. It is such a delight to see elephants relaxed and well fed.





While a white rhino has a relaxed drink at the waterhole, after sunset, a black rhino and her calf make a far more cautious, tentative and reactive approach, preferring a full cloak of darkness before they drink.





Above: A zebra family in a meadow at dawn. Below: My new favourite subject for fine art photography - a subject tree with 'incidental' animals. In this case a pack of wild dogs and wandering giraffe.



All stories and photographs by Jenny Hishin, unless otherwise indicated.